

Washington, DC – Today, Reps. Michael E. McMahon (D-NY) and Thomas J. Rooney (R-FL) celebrated another victory in their fight to ensure that our service men and women receive adequate mental health care. Included in the Defense Authorization Bill for FY 2010 is the language from H.R. 1308, the Veterans Mental Health Assessments and Screening Act, which was cosponsored by McMahon and Rooney and introduced on March 5, 2009. The bipartisan H.R. 1308 was submitted by the Members for inclusion into the Defense Authorization bill earlier this year. The Defense Authorization Act passed the House today by a vote of 281 to 146 and is expected to be signed into law by President Obama tomorrow.

The McMahon/Rooney provision is included in the Defense Authorization bill under Sec. 708 and addresses the epidemic of suicides seen in the military, particularly amongst the population serving in and/or returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The provision mandates service members to participate in mandatory and confidential one-to-one mental health screenings. Sec. 708 differs slightly from H.R. 1308, wherein the Members requested that all returning service men and women participate in these screenings upon their return home. However, it is a welcomed first step in addressing the increasing instances of suicide seen among the ranks of our Armed Services. Today, the data on suicides in the military from January through September was released and the number was an alarming 117.

“We cannot afford to keep losing the brave young men and women to suicide,” said Rep. McMahon. “Almost 120 soldiers committing suicide in under a year is frightening and something must be done to stop this. I am proud that our provisions from the Veterans Mental Health Assessments and Screening Act was included in the Defense Authorization Act; however, this is only a first step in achieving the complete care our service men and women deserve. I will continue to work with my friend and colleague, Tom Rooney, who I thank for his tireless commitment on this issue.”

“The provisions included in the National Defense Authorization Act taken from my mental health bill (H.R. 1308) mandating mental health screening is a good first step to help get our troops the help they deserve,” said Rep. Rooney. “I would like to thank Rep. McMahon for his hard work and dedication to this crisis. This is a great example of how we can work together in a bipartisan manner to help better serve our men and women in uniform. I will continue to work with Rep. McMahon to ensure the provisions included in the NDAA are properly implemented and I look forward to continuing to work with Secretary Gates on additional steps we can take to ensure the proper mental health care is provided for our troops.”

Currently, the Department of Defense requires service members to fill out a mental health assessment before returning home. Unfortunately, if this subjective paper assessment is filled out honestly and indicates risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury or depression, the service member may be prevented from returning home in order to ensure that the mental condition does not go untreated. The delay in returning home coupled with the stigma associated with reaching out for help to treat a mental injury prevents soldiers from being honest in their assessments. A mandatory screening for ALL service members can reduce the growing rates of suicides amongst service members while fighting this debilitating stigma.

Reps. McMahon and Rooney are anticipating that the Department of Defense will issue guidance on the specifics of the McMahon/Rooney provision within six months. Both Members have pledged to ensure that these critical mental health screenings will be one-on-one and will occur in a manner which reduces the stigma in our military currently attached to seeking mental health care.

The McMahon/Rooney provision is not the first time these two freshmen lawmakers have joined forces to fight for our soldiers and veterans. In addition to introducing the Veterans Mental Health Assessments and Screening Act, the Members held a press conference on May 13, 2009 to discuss their joint letter to Chairman John Murtha and Ranking Member Bill Young, which called for an additional \$300 million in funding for mental health care in the Defense Budget, per Sec. Gates' recommendation. Following receipt of this letter, the Appropriations defense subcommittee included a welcomed \$500 million for mental health care in the Defense Appropriations Bill.